

## **John Locke, “Of Civil Government” (1688)**

*John Locke was a Scot who wrote “Of Civil Government” in 1688 in response to the Glorious Revolution in Britain. In this bloodless coup, the authoritarian King James II was deposed and replaced by King William and Queen Mary who agreed to grant Parliament sovereignty over some matters. Locke wrote in support of the Glorious Revolution he opposed absolute monarchy and favored government by a representative legislature. Nearly a century later, Americans would use Locke’s words to justify their revolution against British rule.*

*As you read, think about what Locke means by a “state of nature”. Why would man leave such a state of “perfect freedom”? What is the purpose of society according to Locke? What recourse do individuals have if the leaders of a society abuse their power or fail to fulfill those goals for which the society was established. Also, think about why Americans would have found Locke’s words in support of the British government useful in their eventual rebellion against the British government.*

### Chapter II: Of the State of Nature

We must consider what state all men are naturally [originally] in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit... without depending on the will of any other man.

A state also of equality wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another....

### Chapter VII: Of Political or Civil Society

Whenever... any number of men are so united into one society, as to quit everyone his executive power of the law of nature, and to resign it to the public, there and there only is a political, or civil society. And this is done, wherever any number of men, in the state of nature, enter into society to make one people, one body politic, under one supreme government; or else when any one join himself to... any government already made: for hereby he authorizes the society [and its legislature]... to make laws for him, as the public good of the society shall require.... And this puts men out of a state of nature into that of a commonwealth, by setting up a judge on earth, with authority to determine all the controversies, and redress the injuries that may happen to any member of the commonwealth....

Hence, it is evident, that absolute monarchy, which by some men is counted the only government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all.... For he being supposed to have all, both legislative and executive power in himself alone, there is no judge to be found, no appeal lies open to

any one, who may fairly and indifferently, and with authority decide, and from whose decision relief and redress may be expected of any injury or inconveniency that may be suffered from the [absolute monarch].... For whenever any two men... have no... common judge [to] appeal to on earth, for the determination of controversies of right betwixt them, there they are still in the state of nature [and not part of a civil society].... [A common man] the subject, or rather slave of an absolute prince... whenever his property is invaded by the will and order of the [absolute] monarch, he has not only no appeal, as those in society ought to have... [but he is also] denied a liberty to... defend his right; and so is exposed to all the misery and inconveniences, that a man can fear....

### Chapter VIII: Of the Beginning of Political Societies

Men being, as has been said, by nature [in a state of nature], all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. The only way, whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bond of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community, for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security....

When any number of men have, by the consent of every individual, made a community, they have thereby made that community one body, with a power to act as one body, which is only by the will and determination of the majority.... It being necessary for that which is one body to move one way...; it is necessary the body should move that way whither the greater force [the majority] carries it.... And therefore we see... the act of the majority passes for the act of the whole....

And thus every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation, to every one of that society, to submit to the determination of the majority....

### Chapter IX: Of the Ends of Political Society and Government

If man in the state of nature be so free, as has been said; if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest and subject to nobody, why will he part with his freedom? Why will he... subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer, that though in a state of nature he hath such right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others; for... every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state [of nature] is very unsafe, very insecure. This makes him willing to quit a condition, which however free, is full of fears and continual dangers; and it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others... for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property.

There great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property. To which in a state of nature there are many things wanting.

First, [ in a state of nature] there wants an established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong, and he common measure to decide all controversies between them....

Secondly, in the state of nature there wants a known and indifferent judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law: for every one in that state being both judge and executioner of the law of nature, men being partial to themselves, passion and revenge is very apt to carry them too far, and with too much heat in their own cases; as well as negligence and underconcernedness, to make them too remiss in other men's.

Thirdly, in the state of nature, there often wants power to back and support the sentence when right, and to give it due execution....

Thus mankind, notwithstanding all the privileges of the state of nature... are quickly driven into society.... The inconveniences that [men] are therein exposed to [in a state of nature], by the irregular and uncertain exercise of the power every man has of punishing the transgressions of others, make them take sanctuary under the established laws of government, and therein seek the preservation of their property.... And in this we have the original right of... governments and societies themselves....

But though men, when they enter into society, give up the equality, liberty, and executive power they had in the state of nature, into the hands of society, to be so far disposed of by the legislature, as the good of society shall require; yet it being only with an intention in every one the better to preserve himself, his liberty and property... the power of the society, or legislative constituted by them can never be supposed to extend farther than the common good; but it is obliged to secure every one's property, by providing against those... defects above mentioned, that made the state of nature so unsafe and uneasy....

#### Chapter XIX: Of the Dissolution of Government

The reason why men enter into society, is the preservation of their property; and the end why they choose and authorize a legislature is, that there may be laws made, and rules set, as guards and fences to the property of all the members of society: to limit the power, and moderate the dominion, of every part and member of society.... Whenever the legislators endeavor to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any farther obedience.... Whensoever therefore the legislature shall transgress this fundamental rule of society; and either by ambition, fear, folly or corruption, endeavor to grasp themselves... an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people, by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the

people had put into their hands... and it devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty, and... provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society.... What I have said here, concerning the legislative in general holds true also concerning the [executive]... when he goes about to set up his own arbitrary will as the law of the society.

Whosoever uses force without right, as every one does in society who does it without law, puts himself into a state of war with those against whom he so used it; and in that state all former ties are canceled, all other rights cease, and every one has a right to defend himself, and to resist the aggressor....